

# **LEADING GENERATION X**

## **EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

BY: Danny D. Wright  
Lincoln Fire Department  
Lincoln, Nebraska

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## **ABSTRACT**

Benson (1998) reports that 80 percent of all new hires in virtually all industries will be from the X generation. Because the Lincoln Fire Department (LFD) has hired 49 new people and will probably hire 51 more in the next three years, and because of the Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP), the LFD will create an expanding generational gap between the Boomers and Xers over the next five years.

A problem facing the leadership in the fire service today is that its culture has evolved from the Veteran and Baby Boomer generations. Their values and work ethics influenced those in the fire service to desire to help others in need and to become high achievers in their careers. However, the next generation's, Generation X, culture challenges the fire service leadership because their values and ethics are different from those of the previous generations. These differences make Xers frustrated with the leadership of the Boomers, and Boomers frustrated with the follower-ship of the Generation Xers.

The purpose of this research is to identify the differences in the work cultures of the Baby Boomer leaders, and the Generation X followers. Information obtained in this project will assist the fire service in understanding the differences between the generations and will work towards improving the relationships between the generations to remove the frustrations currently experienced by the fire service.

This project will use the historical research method. The three questions posed for this research are:

1. What cultural behaviors can be identified within the Baby Boomer generation?
2. What cultural behaviors can be identified within the Generation Xers?

3. What must the fire service leadership consider to blend the cultures of the Boomers and Xers?

Procedures included searching the National Fire Academy (NFA) Learning Resource Center, (LRC) located in Emmitsburg, MD and the Southeast Community College Learning Resource Center, (SCCLRC) located in Lincoln, NE. The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) was contacted for any recommendations for sources. The World Wide Web was searched, and personal interviews with LFD personnel from both generations were conducted. Phone conversations with personnel and pension managers for the City of Lincoln were conducted.

The results found that the Boomer generation is dissatisfied with the next generation claiming they are lazy and have no work ethic. However, the Xers are nothing more than a product of the Boomer generation. The Boomers' commitment to their work and the quest for dual incomes forced the Xers to be more independent and more in tune with the fast-paced technologies. The fire service is going to have to recognize that diversity includes not only ethnic and gender acceptance, but also age acceptance.

The recommendations include narrowing the generation gap by communicating a clear mission and organizational values to all new applicants during their initial interviews. Each generation must learn to communicate with each other more openly. Management must employ training that is realistic and applicable to the new firefighters to prepare them to carry on with the LFD mission as the Boomers retire.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page Number
Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Background and Significance.....	6
Literature Review.....	10
Procedures.....	16
Results.....	18
Discussion.....	21
Recommendations.....	24
References.....	27

## APPENDICES

Appendix A.....	29
Appendix B.....	30

## TABLES

Table 1.....	7
Table 2.....	8

## INTRODUCTION

In the year 2000, the LFD increased its firefighter and administrative staffs with the addition of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) transportation

The additional staff for EMS transportation has increased the work force by 48 members. Of those new hires, 45 were born between 1961 and 1980. Hereafter these people will be referred to as “generation Xers.” Only three were born prior to 1961. This group will be referred to as “Boomers.”

The LFD also adopted a pension change that will implement a DROP program. Today 46 members meet or exceed the requirements and eligibility for retirement. However, LFD’s Fire Administration has received indications that those members plan to apply for the DROP benefit, which could result in having 46 members of the Boomer generation stay an additional five years. World News Tonight with Peter Jennings reported that more Americans are working longer due to the rise in insurance prices, taxes, and the cost of living. (March 6, 2001) Eligible members who enroll in the DROP can remain employed and defer their pension benefits for up to five additional years. Doing this will allow them to increase their net worth on retirement.

The LFD faces an increasing generational gap: it is hiring generation Xers and retaining Boomers. These two factors will intensify the need for the LFD to address the cultures of the Boomers and Xers.

Not only are Baby Boomers staying, they also hold the majority of leadership positions within LFD.

A problem facing leadership in the fire service today is that the WWII Veterans and Baby Boomers have established its culture. Their values and work ethic have

influenced those in the fire service to want to help others in need and to become high achievers in their careers. However, the Generation X culture challenges the fire service leadership because its values and ethics differ from those of the previous generations. These differences cause Boomers to be frustrated with the follower-ship of the Generation Xers, and the Xers to be frustrated with the leadership of the Boomers.

The purpose of this research is to identify the differences between the work cultures of the Baby Boomer leaders and the Generation X followers. Information obtained in this project will assist the fire service to understand the differences between the generations and will help it work towards improving relationships between the generations, reducing the frustrations currently experienced by the fire service.

This project will use the historical research method. The three questions posed for this research are as follows:

1. What cultural behaviors can be identified within the Baby Boomer generation?
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### **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

On January 1, 2001 at 00:00 hours, the LFD assumed the responsibilities of EMS transport following a long and heated dispute with two members of the city council, Rural Metro, and the medical community.

Hain (2001) reported in the *Lincoln Journal Star*,

In the New Year, meanwhile, the Lincoln Fire Department assumed its most significant new mission in a 116-year history. The Dept. had prepared feverishly since a Nov. 7 referendum on the city's ambulance takeover for a Jan. 1 beginning (pp.1A).

Because of the additional responsibilities of EMS transport, it was necessary to hire more employees; therefore, 48 firefighters, paramedics, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), and staff employees were hired and placed on line.

The Fire Administration had begun preparations for the new responsibility of EMS transport as far back as August of 2000. Table 1, below, show the timeline for the new hires.

**TABLE 1. NEW HIRE TIMELINE**

<b>Hire Date:</b>	<b>Number of employees</b>	<b>Position</b>
October 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	6	FF/Paramedics
November 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	12	FF/Paramedics
November 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2000	12	Firefighters
January 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2001	4	FF/Paramedics
January 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2001	3	Firefighters
January 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	6	EMT/Paramedics
January 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	5	EMS administrative staff
Total additional employees	48	

The age break down for LFD employees is indicated in Table 2. The data indicate that 5 current members fall within the Veteran's generation, 140 fall within the Boomer generation, while 144 are in the X generation as of March 9, 2001.

**TABLE 2. AGE BREAK DOWN**

<b>Fire Department Personnel By Age</b>	<b>Number Of Personnel</b>	<b>Year Range of Birth</b>	<b>Generation Class</b>
Up to 30	55	1971 to 1982	Generation X
31 to 40	99	1961 to 1970	Generation X
41 to 50	99	1951 to 1960	Boomers
51 to 60	41	1941 to 1950	Boomers
61 and Over	5	1931 to 1940	Veterans
Totals	299		

During a LFD management meeting, Fire Chief Mike Spadt (meeting, February 15, 2001) informed administrative staff and labor leadership of plans for the LFD to add two new fire stations and four new companies within the next three years. The plan is for Lincoln to vote on a bond issue in May, 2002. The LFD would be required to add at least 48 fire suppression staff and three support staff with this organizational increase. If the community approves, LFD's authorized strength will increase by 51 people in the next three years. This would result in a total increase of 99 people within a 36-month timeframe. The expectation is that all of those 51 additional employees would be Generation Xers.



The statistics from the last several years indicate that the majority of personnel hired will be from the X generation, and it is likely that few, if any, Boomer generation people will be hired again.

A month before the February 15, 2001 management meeting, all LFD members received a letter from Georgia Glass, Director of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Personnel Department (personal communication January 9, 2001) regarding the status of the change to their pension benefits.

In June 2000 the City approved amending the pension with a DROP. The DROP allows a member to retire for pension purposes, but to continue working. The member would receive a check every two weeks from his or her work, and the member's monthly pension benefit would be deposited into the member's DROP account.

The member would choose how to invest the money in his or her DROP account. At the end of five years, or any time before five years, the member must "retire-in-fact." When the member retires-in-fact, his or her monthly pension benefit will be paid directly to the member (not the member's DROP account) and the member will have access to the money in his or her DROP account.

There is no indication from LFD personnel who are eligible to retire that they will retire within the next five years due to the DROP program. Because of this, it is likely that the LFD will include 5 members of the Veterans generation, 140 members within the Boomer generation and 195 Generation Xers by the year 2004. Because of the differences in work and employee expectations between the Boomers and the Xers, it is important for

Fire Administration to address and blend their cultures to meet the LFD's mission effectively for the Lincoln community.

Information obtained at the National Fire Academy (NFA) "Executive Leadership" course held on campus from October 9 through October 20, 2000, provided guidance in the choice of this project. Unit 6's terminal objective "Succession/Replacement Planning," states, "Given experiences and models from industry: the students will be able to develop an appreciation for workforce planning, development, and succession planning" (Student Manual, 2000, p.6-3). Activities and discussions in this course contributed to the recognition of the diversity of generations within the LFD.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Information and literature were obtained for this project through personal communications, journals, related Executive Fire Officer (EFO) applied research projects, international organizations, and video programs.

Arnhart (2000) informs attendees at the National Training Resources and Data Exchange (TRADE) Conference that "Baby Boomers" were born between 1943 and 1960. They were born during a time of optimism and growth in our nation. Boomers tend to be self-centered as they were the "shining stars" in the eyes of their parents.

Schlichtemeier-Nutzman (2000) suggests several events and influences that shaped the Baby Boomers.

- The introduction of T. V. and ability to see news.
- Broader view of society.
- Flower power.

- Introduction of the polio vaccine.
- Legalization of abortion.
- Civil rights movement.
- Feminist movement.
- Viet Nam War and the anti-war movement.

As a result of those influences, Baby Boomers were shaped to socialize more as a team and enjoy the comradery and togetherness of each other. It was common for them to view their supervisors with respect and place them on a pedestal. Boomers tended to feel that if they worked hard and waited their turn, advancement would follow. During the primarily autocratic work era of the Boomers, Boomers typically followed directions and orders without question.

During an International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) teleconference, Page (2000) discusses the Boomer era as Boomers were promoted to supervisors. Fire departments typically provided new supervisors with an orientation that may have included how to complete time cards, overtime forms, fire and accident reports. Few, if any, guidelines or little training was given in what course of action to take if a firefighter disobeyed an order or if horseplay had gone too far.

King (1998) writes, see also Benson (1998), that the Boomer managers generally see the Xers as slackers, whiners, underachievers, lazy complainers who “Don’t want to pay their dues” and have a “This world owes me” mentality (1998, p 8).

Page also indicates that fire departments have not adequately recognized the role and the influence of the company officer in establishing and maintaining appropriate

standards and decorum at the fire company level. As a result departments haven't trained company officers in the people issues that so greatly influence the organizational culture.

The dominant culture in a lot of fire departments is not appropriate to the times, and it detracts from the primary organizational goal: the protection of life and property from fire and other emergencies.

The fire department culture that stubbornly fights to keep things the way they have always been seems strangely out of kilter. Our society is one where today's technological, scientific, and social change is occurring in dog years, seven times faster than human years.

Bennis and Townsend (1995) sum up the changing leadership styles. Making the transition from the old style of leadership to the new one is a challenge for top management in every organization. The militaristic, command-and-control leadership of the past has become an anachronism. The time has come to ask yourself: "Have I adapted to this new set of standards or am I hanging on to the rules of the past?"

Generation Xers, born between 1961 and 1981, were raised during a time of stress and strain on their families. Xers are often referred to as "Latchkey" kids and are more independent and self-reliant than their predecessors (Arnhart, 2000).

In an EFO paper written by King, see also Benson (1998) the Xers are described as:

- Products of latchkey parenting and unprecedented divorce rates.
- Inheritors of a stagnant job market, corporate downsizing and limited wage mobility.
- The first generation predicted to earn less than their parents did.

- People who feel abandoned, cheated, and left to fend for themselves.
- People who collectively say “no” to traditional management approaches in the workplace. (2000, p.16).

Many of the Xers are products of the world in which they were raised. With their independence, they tend to keep their employment options open. Most enjoy being presented with challenges but would prefer to work alone. Because of this, they may not be adept at teamwork early on.

Smith (2000) writes that the parents of the Xers often left the children home alone, while they mortgaged their lives for fast cars and prestige. Cable television became widely available, with Music Television the entertainment of choice. It is not surprising that many of these kids formed a negative view of the world.

Few Xers have any military experience. They are unfamiliar with any chain of command and may go around supervisors if they want, not out of disrespect, but out of a desire to effect change more quickly. Xers seem to question everything and want immediate gratification (Martin, 2000).

Xers bring to the workplace new values and expectations, which are not well understood by Boomer leaders. Conversely, the value system of the Boomers is not really understood or appreciated by the newer employees (Labdell, 1999).

Joy (1997) suggests that each generation has its own unique qualities that state who the people are. All generations have looked upon the preceding generation as holding onto the old way of thinking and on succeeding generations as inept.

Because of this stereotyping and because of the different philosophies, orientating new hires and developing a commitment to organizational norms become mandatory.

“Succession planning is a critical element of organizational strategy.

Organizations with well-developed employee development and planning methods are more competitive. Public safety organizations achieve excellence through a well trained and competitive work force” (Student Manual, p.6-3).

Smith (2000) states, “Research in organizational commitment suggests that change occurs every time an employee is hired. In situations where a few individuals are brought into a highly structured organization, the perceived need for the new hire to conform is great” (p.32).

Strategies to manage a new generation must fall on the entire organization, not just the individual managers or supervisors. This should include a commitment to organizational socialization, an emphasis on human resource development, and organizational commitment to valuing workforce diversity (Smith 2000).

Smith (2000) indicates that most researchers agree that organizational socialization is accomplished in three steps. The first involves the organization’s establishing role clarity for the newcomer, setting expectations, and rewarding and punishing behaviors.

Managers and co-workers need to establish appropriate work behaviors and stress the kinds of behavioral outcomes that lead to organizational success.

The second step involves a commitment to organizational norms, the establishment of interpersonal relationships and feelings of importance to the organization.

The final phase involves mutual acceptance and an internalization of organizational values.

Martin quotes sociologist Massey, as saying, “Differences among people are based on SEA: Sex, Ethnicity, and Age. While many organizations have spent time and money dealing with the first two, we’ve often neglected the third” (2000, p.62).

Smith (2000) feels that there is no reason to suspect that the gene pool somehow became contaminated in the early 1960’s. On the contrary, intelligence and ambition are distributed in the same proportion in every generation. In fact, the X generation seems to have a great deal of technological savvy and the ability to communicate using a broad range of information media. The generation gap widens when Boomer supervisors fail to recognize the strengths of the Xers. It is a mistake to assume that the young employee is always the one who needs to change his or her behavior.

Martin suggests that training and mentoring are critical for the Xers. “Gen X is a creative, enthusiastic group of people with much to offer. We have to start by accepting them and training them to have the skills we know they’ll need to carry on when we retire” (2000, p.63).

The literature review reveals that the Boomer generation is rooted deeply in its culture. Most supervisors of that generation expect that new employees should belong to the same culture and have the same behaviors as the Boomers. Those expectations are not in the best interest of the organization. Attitudes and behaviors such as these will only increase the generation gap.

The Generation X culture stems, in part, from the workaholic attitude of the Boomer generation. The independence of the Xers has resulted from the latchkey setting most were exposed to while growing up.

Blending these generational cultures has to be the responsibility of the organization starting with the top managers and including supervisors, and all employees.

## **PROCEDURES**

The research procedure began in October 2000 at the NFA LRC, Emmitsburg, Maryland. A search of the NFA LRC database using key words of “Generation X”, “Xers”, “Baby Boomers” and “Boomers” was made. Parameter dates of 1995 to 2000 were utilized, with journals and EFO papers being selected to narrow the results.

A search of the World Wide Web (WWW) using a Microsoft Network search engine was conducted in December 2000. Identical parameters were used on the WWW as were used at the NFA LRC. Several hundred thousand references were identified.

A phone conversation with the IAFC in December 2000 requested any information on the topics of leading or managing Generation X or the Baby Boomers. They recommended an audio cassette program titled *Generation X, Y, Z: Managing Generations & Diversity*. A copy was obtained for this research.

A search for diversity videos within the LFD video library found a video produced in May of 2000 by LFD. The video, *LFD Teleconference: Multi-generational Diversity* was viewed and utilized.

In January 2001 a search of the SCCLRC, Lincoln Campus was conducted using the same parameters used at the NFA LRC. Little success was initially obtained. The SCCLRC staff suggested a similar search be made using the interlibrary loan WWW sites available through their computer network. Several sites were searched consisting of EBSCOHOST found on the WWW at (<http://search.epnet.com/login.asp>). Another search



of FIRST SEARCH located on the WWW at (<http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org/>) was made. Both sites were able to produce sources suitable for this project.

Interviews with ten LFD Company officers, all within the Boomer generation, and similar interviews with ten Generation Xers were conducted. Questions for the interviews are displayed in Appendix A and B.

A phone conversation with Paul Lutomski, City of Lincoln pension representative, was held on February 20. The purpose was to discuss the DROP program and the effect it is expected to have on the retirement options for eligible employees.

Limitations identified with this research project included a wide variety of traditional text sources available on the leadership styles of the Veteran and Boomer generations, but not for the Generation Xers. The WWW had literally hundreds of thousands of references to Generation X. However, the time and effort necessary to review so much data goes beyond the allowable time for this project.

Conversations with Boomer supervisors and Generation X employees had limitations due to the cultures of each generation. Their responses could have been affected by who their supervisor was at the time, or whether or not the employees had outside influences affecting them on the day of the conversation.

## RESULTS

The information obtained from the research for this paper contained sufficient data to answer the established research questions set forth in the introduction section as follows:

### **1. What cultural behaviors can be identified within the Baby Boomer generation?**

Most of the research presented similar findings regarding the cultural beliefs of the Boomers.

Schlichtmeier-Nutzman's (2000) research finds multiple common feelings of the Boomer generation. Boomers often see Generation Xers as slackers.

Benson (1998) also suggests that Boomers see Xers as slackers, as well as using other less complimentary adjectives about that generation. She finds that the Boomer generation feels the Generation X employees work ethic and attitude are unacceptable.

Page (2000) indicates that the Boomer generation feels that the Xers seem to ignore the fragile and complex set of unspoken dos and don'ts of the fire service culture.

The fire house culture today is deeply rooted due to the long careers of most firefighters. The lack of respect towards the fire service culture leads to frustration on behalf of the Boomers and tends to undermine harmony in the fire station. Boomers often feel that the younger firefighters may be more confrontational and unwilling to accept the Boomers' leadership at face value.

Feldman and Arnold (1983) find in a University of Iowa study that there were three leadership styles: authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire. Most Boomers were supervised in their earlier careers under authoritarian styles of leadership. Under this style of leadership, the firefighter had little or no input in decisions. The Iowa study indicates the preferred style evolved toward a democratic style, where employees had input. The Boomer generation is being forced to recognize the needs of the Xers and the leadership style they prefer.

## **2. What cultural behaviors can be identified within the Generation Xers?**

Schlichtemeier-Nutzman (2000) suggests that Xers see their supervisors as peers or more on the same level. Most are gutsy and will generally ask for higher positions than the entry level.

These attitudes may be attributed to their “latchkey kid” upbringings and the independence that generation experienced. They like to have a great amount of input and comment on their supervisors’ decisions. They like to have black and white direct answers with no gray areas.

Most Xers see the Boomers as workaholics with a commitment towards the organization over all else, including family. The Xers would prefer to place friends, family and fun above the organization.

Arnhart (2000) reports that Generation X employees are not mechanically inclined or hands-on type of people. Xers were raised during a time when education was based on abstract thoughts, not learning trades.

Martin (2000) agrees with Arnhart. New recruits seem to have lower levels of mechanical aptitude and less knowledge of how things work.

Generation X firefighters entering the fire service seem to lack the mechanical skills and knowledge base possessed by the previous generation. Firefighters lack the experience of driving standard transmissions, doing construction, understanding electrical theory and other technical trade skills commonly needed in emergency work.

### **3. What must the fire service leadership consider to blend the cultures of the Boomers and Xers?**

Page (2000) indicates that to supervise the X generation effectively, leaders must demonstrate ethical conduct as a matter of character.

Boomer supervisors will be held to a higher standard by the younger generation. They will be judged on how they act and how they treat others, and the Xers will be critical of their supervisors' behavior. Xers will only respect their Boomer supervisors if they earn it.

Observations by Page (2000) also suggest that the Boomer supervisors may end up with some parental responsibilities resulting from hiring firefighters as young as 19.

Martin (2000) indicates that it is important for the Boomers to "expand the fire officers' traditional role. An officer is expected to be a role model, motivator, communicator, coach, mentor, supporter and provider of much more than direction and leadership" (p.60).

Many Boomer supervisors today may find this expansion of responsibilities as a result of hiring inept employees or immature kids into the fire service. If the Boomers want to leave the fire service in capable hands, they must take the next generation under their wings.

“Most companies have found that their Generation X employees thrive in an environment where they learn new skills and apply new problem solving techniques. In fact, this generation is more accepting of constant change than its Boomer counterpart” (Smith, 2000, p. 32).

Martin (2000) recommends that repetitive, high input training should become the norm. Xers don't quickly grasp the “new” sets of skills they need because they don't bring the background with them.

The Boomers must create real life and challenging training simulations about what to expect in the fire service. The research indicates that Xers are willing to learn provided the training is beneficial, cognitive and practical.

The Boomer generation must be realistic and explicit in the directions given to Xers. They must remember that the assumptions Boomers make about the assignments given to Xers are based on the values and experience of the Boomer, not the Xer.

## **DISCUSSION**

“The education gap is expanding between workers and the needs of the fire service. Values are changing, and there's a real mix of values working side by side” (Martin, 2000, p.60). This statement is consistent with Jennings (2001) and his report on employees working longer and retiring later in life.

Lutonski and Glass (phone conversation on February 20, 2001) concur that the workforce is expanding particularly with the implementation of the DROP program. This program encourages employees to stay longer by increasing their net worth upon retirement. Today with the high cost of living, health insurance, and taxes, most

employees are not willing to retire early, but rather they continue to work and increase their benefits as long as possible.

With the Boomer generation staying longer due to the DROP program, and the hiring of many additional Generation Xers due to organizational growth, the LFD will see the generation gap expand.

One solution to improving the generation gap in the workforce is self-evaluation.

Each generation needs to understand where the other generations are coming from, (i.e., economy, demographics, and worldviews). When generations discover why they are different, they can then begin to compromise, stop categorizing each other, and create a strong working relationship (Arnhart, 2000, p. 15).

Many sources reveal similar findings regarding the cultures of the Boomers and Xers. Schlichtemeier-Nutzman (2000) indicates several factors that have influenced Generation Xers. They have been exposed to constant technological change in their lives. Xers grew up in a culture with high divorce rates. They often had single parents or both parents in the workforce and were therefore latchkey kids, which is believed to be a contributing factor for their independence. Their lives have been influenced by T.V., and their generation has never had any legitimate heroes or heroines.

Smith (2000) describes this generation similarly to Schlichtemeier-Nutzman's findings. Both agree on the latchkey concept. Smith feels Xers are also influenced by the dual-income family and caught up in the fast pace of the technological changes.

Page (2000) suggests that a key to the success of managing Generation Xers is effective listening. An effective officer needs to keep his/her antenna up and pay attention particularly to the different cultures found in the fire station. Listening helps the officer

learn about the cultures under his/her command. Generation X employees, even though they prefer to be independent, tend to like feedback on their performance. Supervisors must listen carefully to provide the necessary feedback that will build confidence in the Xers and cooperation with the Boomers.

Page (2000) indicates that the company officer must create a civilized conclusion to events that overwhelm ordinary citizens. In order to do that, he or she must subdue the individuality of the members of the company. This is accomplished through teamwork and discipline. Subduing the individuality of Generation Xers may be the greatest challenge.

Observations within the LFD have indicated that the generation gap certainly exists. It is all too common for supervisors of the Boomer era to express their concerns about new employees and their lack of commitment to the organization. Supervisors often feel their authority challenged by subordinates who question orders or directives.

Xers, on the other hand, feel that their commitment to the organization is exactly where it should be. They believe that family and friends should come first, fun second, and then work. It is often said that the Xers “Work to have fun.” This concept is totally foreign to the Boomers, who have often been called the “workaholic” generation. To them, “Work is fun.”

Understanding these generations is critical for the LFD to move toward narrowing the gap between these two generations. As the organization grows and senior officers enter into the DROP program and new employees are hired, it will be necessary to develop a positive strategy for our age diversity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The LFD has evolved for the last one hundred and twenty five years. It has served its community well by providing fire, emergency medical, rescue, and public service. Its culture has evolved over many generations as well, and currently the culture has been molded and institutionalized by the Boomer generation. Because the X generation enters the fire service with a new culture, a different set of values and ethics comes with them. These differences have created a generation gap and have presented challenges to the officers, who are primarily Boomers.

The purpose of this project was to determine what the fire service should consider doing to narrow the generational gap.

Smith (2000) refers to John Wanous, a pioneer in organizational commitment, who suggests

that the transition into a new corporate lifestyle needs to be managed. Early communications concerning organizational culture have to be realistic since discrepancies between employee expectations and reality may lead to high levels of turnover. These expectations are communicated during interviews, orientation, and, most importantly, the first months of employment (p.32).

Martin (2000) states, “This generation of firefighters doesn’t initially have a grasp of seniority. If “paying your dues” is part of your organizational culture, and you value it, you’ll have to explain it and make sure it’s fair and unbiased” (p. 64).

It is unrealistic and a poor management choice to try to manage the Xers as if they were Boomers.



The LFD should incorporate into its interview process for new applicants a clear understanding of its organizational values and expected commitment from employees. The interview should be such that the new applicant would have an opportunity to learn as much about the LFD as the LFD would learn about the new applicant. Each new applicant should have an understanding of what the mission of the LFD is. This process should not be to find candidates who can be converted to Boomers, but rather to find candidates who have the ability to work in a semi-military organization where a chain of command and disciplined personnel are critical to its mission.

Experience and data support the point that Xers are entering the fire service with fewer hands-on skills. Training should include mechanical skills, tools, realistic scenarios, and as much practical application as possible to prepare this generation both to work with experienced Boomers and also to take over when they retire.

Management should address and implement additional diversity training for the Boomer generation to include not only ethnic and gender training, but also generation training. The LFD management must address the generational gap issues by providing information on the values and beliefs of each generation to all employees. This will open the communications necessary to learn about each generation.

Supervisors must remember their role may now include additional coaching and mentoring of new employees. They need to remember Generation Xers hands-on skills may not meet previous expectations; however, this generation is a sharp, well-educated group who had more emphasis placed on academics rather than on technical skills. Xers may ask supervisors questions that may challenge organizational policy or practice. Supervisors will have to adjust and be prepared to answer those questions with factual

data to support their answers. The old standby answer of, "That's the way it's always been" is not acceptable to this generation.

Communication and listening skills are critical to narrow the gap between the Boomers and Xers. Management and labor need to work hard together to create a culture that includes what both young and old expect from each other to meet the LFD's mission and commitment to the community.

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## **APPENDIX A**

Conversation questions asked of Boomer supervisors:

1. What follower-ship concerns do you have with your personnel?
2. What are your concerns regarding Generation X personnel and their organizational commitment?
3. Do you think there is a different work ethic displayed by Generation X personnel?  
If yes, Why?
4. What are your concerns regarding job skills with the Generation X personnel?

## **APPENDIX B**

Conversations with Generation X employees.

1. What leadership concerns do you have with your supervisors?
2. Would you consider changing careers within the next 10 years? If yes, to do what?
3. Would you consider your work ethic compatible with your supervisors?
4. What job skills do you feel are necessary to perform your job?